

Duxbury Clipper, Thursday, August 1, 1974

HERONRY ON CLARK'S ISLAND INCLUDES 5 SPECIES

Bay State ornithological history was made in Plymouth on July 13 when 3 biologists from the Manomet Bird Observatory confirmed a suspicion that had been growing for a year or 2 among knowledgeable birders in the Duxbury area. A heronry of substantial size and containing at least 5 species of successfully-nesting herons and allies exists on Clark's Island in Plymouth Harbor, among them the first Glossy Ibises known to have bred in Massachusetts.

Local Interest

Massachusetts bird watchers have been aware for several years that Snowy Egrets and Glossy Ibises, formerly rare stragglers to Massachusetts, have been seen with increasing regularity throughout the warmer months of the year at many localities along the Massachusetts coast. Here on the South Shore, Snowy Egrets can be seen on the inside of Plymouth Beach from May into September, and Glossy Ibises have been seen frequently in Marshfield and Duxbury and inland to Halifax and Middleboro.

Active birders in the Duxbury area, such as summer residents Joseph Lund and Daniel Gray

last year observed the dark Ibises with the long decurved beaks flying toward Clark's Island and began to suspect they might be nesting there. But it was Wayne Petersen of Abington, a science teacher in the Hanover School system, who made repeated observations and counts in 1973 and again this year from vantage points along the Duxbury shore and surmised that not only Snowy Egrets and Black-crowned Night Herons, but possibly: Little Blue Herons and Glossy Ibises as well, were nesting on this 80-acre island off the west end of Saquish Point. Egged on by Petersen's desire to confirm these hunches, Kathleen Anderson, (executive director of the Manomet Bird Observatory) and staff biologist Brian Harrington met at Plymouth Beach at 5:45 a.m. on a full tide and made the 30-minute run to Clark's Island.

Best known as the site of the first night ashore of the small band of Pilgrim fathers scouting the Plymouth area before settlement here in December 1620, Clark's Island is privately owned and zealously protected by the few summer residents. In the generation or 2 since active farming ceased, the island has become densely overgrown with black cherry, red cedar, viburnums, locusts and sumac together with a thick under-story of poison ivy and Virginia creeper. As the 3 biologists slowly circled the northwest side of the island, Herring Gulls could be seen perched in treetops in a most un-gull-like manner, standing about their nest sites beneath shrubs, or resting on the rocky beach. Many young gulls of various sizes roamed among the adults, and it was obvious the gull colony had increased greatly in size since the initial colonization about 10 years ago. A few pairs of the larger, darker Great Black-backed Gulls could be picked out among the gray-mantled Herring Gulls. Almost immediately a few Snowy Egrets were spotted perched in taller trees inland from the gull concentration and Night Herons were observed flying out of the area and off across the bay.

Granted landing permission by an island resident, the trio anchored their boat and proceeded along a maze of trails toward a high point of the island's north end, led by their host, Clinton Watson. What they found far exceeded their hopes. Climbing tall trees on opposite sides of the heronry, Harrington and Peterson could look down on the nesting activity from their swaying perches. They estimated 40 flying young and at least 30 pairs

of adult Snowy Egrets as well as 5 pairs of adult Little Blue Herons with at least 10 young. Two pairs of Great Egrets had 2 nestlings each, the youngsters appearing much less developed than the young Snowies and more recently hatched. Black-crowned Night Herons, both adults and flying young, were continually entering and leaving the heronry and were exceedingly difficult to count accurately, but a conservative estimate of 10 pairs plus at least 20 young was made. Most exciting of all, at least 15 young Glossy Ibises were counted and watched as their parents fed them by regurgitation, a first confirmation of a new nesting species for Massachusetts. A single adult Cattle Egret was seen, but based on counts of Cattle Egrets flying to the island on previous occasions, Petersen feels confident a more careful search would document nesting of this world-wide species as well.

All of these experienced observers had seen mixed colonies of breeding Herons in Florida and even as far north as New Jersey, but the thrill of this Saturday morning expedition was the discovery of the first such colony in Massachusetts, far north of usual occurrences. Although fewer in total numbers than the nearest recently established rookery in Rhode Island, as befits a northern outpost, still it is a first for Massachusetts and should be a source of pride and delight to the residents of the Plymouth and Duxbury area where some 350 years ago another band of enterprising colonists established a foothold in an area far from their origins.

The problem now will be to see that the colony is protected from all disturbance. According to Watson, Egrets were first seen on this island 4 years ago, and 2 years ago (simultaneously with the first spring sightings of large wandering flocks of Ibises on the South Shore) the first Glossy Ibis

settled on Clark's Island. Residents of the island, who value the historic fame and sense of remoteness from the rapid urbanization of the South Shore, can be counted upon to leave the colony in isolation and protected from disturbance. It is up to the residents of the nearby mainland to prevent harassment of the new arrivals from the South as they feed on nearby salt marshes and to take whatever regulatory measures are necessary to assure that the safety of this unique concentration of graceful, tropical wading birds is assured.